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To what avail?: experiments with Japanese Buddhism

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Review article:

Nelson, John K. *Experimental Buddhism: innovation and activism in contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013.

Back in the winter of 1981 it took my companion and me less than two days to become thoroughly sick and fed up of the sanctimonious kerfuffle required to do simple things like buying a bag of sweets at the Sōtō 曹洞 Zen monastic headquarters at Eihei-ji 永平寺 in Fukui. We moved on, and hitching out of town our spirits rose when a large black car hove into view. We stuck out our thumbs expectantly. Of course, it sailed by, its full complement of rather well-endowed Sōtō priests all gazing steadfastly forwards. Over three decades later, that scene does not appear dated (apart from the hitch-hiking, perhaps). But trends that simply occasioned cynical remarks then, now seem to have passed a threshold where people are asking very seriously whether this centuries-old tradition is not in fact dead on its feet, with its main industry – death – being taken over by other parties; and what pastoral function it did have, being whittled away by the plethora of attractions in modern life and technology.

Buddhism experienced a similar level of existential crisis during the Meiji period. Martin Collcutt has analyzed that “threat of eradication”, beginning by citing Fukuda Gyōkai’s fear of an imperial rescript that might have simply removed Buddhism from the face of Japanese society and the body politic (Collcutt 1986, 143). Of course, Collcutt was writing at a time when Buddhism had long since survived the onslaught, which is a crucial difference from John K. Nelson’s work: the latter is looking at a Buddhism currently enmeshed in a web of problems and looking into an uncertain future. Another crucial difference is that Fukuda’s fear was of an edict from the political centre: in contemporary Japan Buddhism is constitutionally protected. Its momentous problems actually stem from changes in the very social fabric that hitherto supported it on the ground. Furthermore, the internet has become a crucial factor in giving people the opportunity to satisfy religious needs without recourse to Buddhism’s traditional trappings (Baffelli et al., 2011).

Nelson has brought us a number of works with refreshing juxtapositions: Shinto priests and salarymen; social memory and spirits of the dead. He achieved this through detailed research into both institutional and popular Shinto, and has recently extended his approach onto the Buddhist side of Japan’s religious fence, noting (in company with a number of both emerging and established scholars) the decline of temple Buddhism (Nelson 2012). The current monograph is the product of assiduous fieldwork in the temples of today’s Japan, of which he lists over forty that were the subject of detailed attention. These are located mainly in the Kansai and Kantō areas and represent the major sects whilst focussing attention on lesser-known groups and inter- or non-denominational temples. As such it is a much-needed complement to the excellent work on traditional sects by scholars such as Stephen Covell and Mark Rowe (Covell and Rowe 2004; Rowe 2011). His latest juxtaposition is thus innovation and activism versus Japanese Buddhism. To explore it he has combined his wide-ranging knowledge of Japanese history and religious institutions with the kind of fieldwork that is not to be found elsewhere, certainly not on this scale. *Experimental Buddhism: innovation and activism in contemporary Japan* is an important, ground-breaking work that no-one with an interest in modern Japan can afford to ignore.

Elisabetta Porcu (2015) has provided us with a detailed summary review of the book, thus allowing me to concentrate on two of the central issues that Nelson deals with—the historical and the socio-political—and how they bear upon the central concern of his book, the future of Buddhism. Throughout, Nelson takes care to place his subjects in both the historical and the socio-political contexts. The question of Buddhism's place in contemporary Japanese society (and hence its future) is bound up with issues of its institutional viability and the roles that organized Buddhism has taken upon itself in response to a nexus of problems that the modern age has thrown at it, especially since the Pacific War. The opening chapters of his book refer these contemporary issues to historical precedents, reminding us of Buddhism's place in society and the body politic during periods as far removed as the Nara. Whilst Nelson's wide-ranging knowledge of Japanese Buddhism's history is impressive and contributes to the usefulness of the book for teaching, the way in which he adduces it in illustration of contemporary problems, raises questions of comparison and causality. If Buddhism had a positive influence on the populace in the Nara period, say, or the Tokugawa period, what level of validity can those observations have for predicting the future of Buddhism in Japan? The extent to which Buddhism was woven into the fabric of Nara and Heian Japan (to use Ryūichi Abe's metaphor) has no parallel today and it is hard to imagine that the future would offer us a Japanese body politic similar to that of the eighth and ninth centuries. Indeed, how would one identify the causality in those historical processes, without succumbing to the broad-brushed sweeps of Japanese history we are rightly so suspicious of?

The Tokugawa period, to which Nelson devotes more space and detail, offers more immediate grounds for comparison, not least because the tension between institutional riches and popular disillusionment echoes many of the situations that Nelson describes in today's Japan. The way in which Buddhism survived the Tokugawa period, is certainly instructive, although it is rather more complex than there is space in one monograph to analyze fully. The assertion that the populace was held by religious beliefs rather than having the freedom to believe (paraphrasing Clifford Geertz, p. 213), is on the face of it compelling. Yet against this, we must bear in mind that Hakuin was not best pleased, nor was Jiun (or, for that matter, quite a number of free thinkers in the mid- to late Tokugawa). Both of these priests had considerable pastoral presence and Hakuin especially kicked against the traces in no uncertain manner, in script and graph, running a real risk of draconian censure from the authorities. They both had on-the-ground communities and served them in much the same way as the radical priests featured in Nelson's work (cf. esp. ch. 4). Tellingly, both Hakuin and Jiun are remembered now because they left literary and material-monumental testimonies to their activities, kept for us in the grander memory by their parent institutions (Rinzai and Shingon, respectively).

Taking the shifting fortunes of Buddhism into the modern period proper, many of the themes touched on by Nelson echo problems that were addressed by the Shin Bukkyō 新仏教 movement in the mid-Meiji period: sterility, adherence to irrelevant dogma, lack of acceptance of pastoral responsibilities (Hoshino 2009). Perhaps one of the decisive differences is the complex relationship between institutional Buddhism and the developed Meiji state, which ensured that even if the proponents of reform had a point, the Buddhist establishment was assured of persisting due to what was effectively state patronage. Contemporary Japan is interesting inasmuch as official relationships between it and the state were dissolved after the Pacific War, yet the state continues to provide a reason for Buddhism's being, seeing it as an important strand in Japan's "soft power". The Buddhist elements of UNESCO World Heritage sites (and the consequent international standing and the revenue from tourism) are one case in point. The modern-day reformers are, in contrast, very much on their own, much more so than their Meiji counterparts, who were part and parcel of heated (and truly radical) debates about Japan's role in the world, the value of Western influence on Japanese society and politics, and the place of Buddhism in all that.

To return briefly to Nelson's reference to Geertz ("individuals want the freedom to hold religious beliefs rather than be held by them"): the crucial contemporary factor is the provision for freedom of belief provided by the Shōwa constitution, the first time that the Japanese people have enjoyed that right, as Murakami pointed out long ago (Murakami 1980, xv–xvi). One permutation of Article 20 would be that people are free not to have anything to do with religious belief or practice at all: the inexorable trend since 1947, borne out by long-term statistical evidence, has been precisely that (Reader 2011, 2012; Astley 2015). Whilst one may have sympathy for the projections that Nelson makes in his concluding chapter, it is hard to see what concrete arguments could be put forward to counter the weight of this historical trend. Certainly, the pastoral work being done by Revds Akita (Ōten'in, Osaka), Takahashi (Jingūji, Matsumoto), Hashimoto (Minna no Tera, Nara), and Kiyoshi (Zuikōji, Osaka) is innovative and commendable (ch. 4). But there is little evidence that the small numbers of people who have benefitted over the last ten years or so of these groups' existence, can constitute the indubitable signs of a Buddhist revival. The logic of these movements' possibility to become major forces for fundamental change on a comparable level with the Meiji Revolution [*sic*], the Japanese women's suffrage movement, anti-nuclear groups and the like (p. 137), requires identifying a number of more substantial premisses before it can become convincing.

The statistics adduced in support of a future for experimental Buddhism do nothing to suggest that these commendable individuals, groups, and initiatives are generating anything like the required momentum to shift the onus for social responsibility away from institutions that number adherents in the seven- and eight-digit range. The three hundred people that a major Pure Land temple might attract for one of its outreach events, pale into insignificance against the millions recorded in the Bunkachō's *Shūkyō nenkan* 宗教年鑑. And Nelson's account of the Freestyle Monks who in 2010 held an online survey about public perceptions of their refreshingly honest views and activities, sounds promising until the figures for the total submission are revealed: 59 (pp. 207f). There is no doubt that individuals and groups are doing innovative things but there is little evidence that it is having, or even is likely to have, a significant impact on Buddhism as a pastoral force any time in the near future. In the wake of Western ideas of culture, fine art, galleries, museums and the like, tremendous efforts have been made over the last century to preserve, present and re-formulate a wonderful cultural heritage, of which Buddhism is an integral part. The pastoral side of things has slowly but surely been neglected. In general, Nelson seems torn between the realization that current efforts to rectify this are minor and peripheral, and the desire for these experiments to come good and re-vitalize institutions that in the modern period have shifted into a cultural role abstracted from the pastoral.

Nelson's knowledge of the structures of Japan's Buddhist institutions and the bureaucratic impasses that beset them, is detailed and backed up by a great deal of practical, hard slog from one city, one headquarters, one temple to another. He builds up a very immediate picture of the inertia that many priests must feel confronted with, should they wish to become active practitioners of a more obvious religious vocation such as pastoral work or perhaps even the monastic life (finding the box with "Monastery" in the crowded diagram of the Sōtō Zen bureaucracy on page 60 is an interesting challenge). The institutions are well entrenched in the cultural identity of the body politic but the way in which the public avail themselves of it is very much treated as part of Japanese culture and identity; very little is channelled towards involvement in the pastoral aspects of Buddhism's social role, certainly not when one compares the efforts that are expended on UNESCO World Heritage ventures or major exhibitions of Buddhist art (itself a modern permutation of Buddhism's traditional roles).

One deceptive but commonly found assumption about the role of religion in Japan is that since it has always been part of the metaphysical glue that holds society together, it always will be. Porcu picks up on this strand of Nelson's approach when she writes, "Religion is thus deeply embedded in a social fabric that continuously reshapes it by urging religious institutions and individual actors to take measures and countermeasures in a trial-and-error pattern" (Porcu 2015). Surely, what is happening in contemporary Japan is that the social fabric has largely rejected religion: the haphazard attempts to bring pastoral Buddhism into a position of relevance are being made from the ragged periphery of that social fabric, not as part of it. One might even go so far as to say that Nelson makes a number of conjectures about the future of Buddhism in Japan, veritably wishing it to survive and flourish, yet the criteria proposed to validate such future success are born very much of the modernism that is strangling it (or at best just allowing it to wither).

In drawing his work to a close, Nelson refers to the many issues that preclude proper conclusions, but then states paradoxically that "[w]e do know, however, that ... we can look forward to new types of practices and beliefs that engage rather than withdraw from the expansive complexities of the twenty-first century and beyond" (p. 216). We cannot really *know* any such thing: we can hope, or not (depending on our propensities), but all we have to go on at the moment are (i) the tremendous momentum away from Buddhism as a way of life, and (ii) the efforts of a tiny, disparate minority to turn that momentum towards a roughly sketched future. Whilst Nelson and Ian Reader, whose work is referred to throughout, agree on the parlous state of institutional Buddhism in contemporary Japan, the former is much more optimistic about the decades ahead. My own view falls between the two, albeit – despite sympathy with Nelson's aspirations for Japanese Buddhism – markedly closer to Reader's dead-end pessimism. As I have remarked elsewhere (Astley 2015), the formal splendour of Japanese Buddhism is flourishing, backed by considerable institutional resources (whether from the individual sects or the government) but at the expense of Buddhism on the ground. If Japanese Buddhism has long since grown weary of *mappō* 末法 talk, perhaps we may be witnessing a regression through a repeat age of the Semblance of the Dharma (*zōbō* 像法) with the prospect of the appearance of a genuine Buddha in the next few centuries. Or so. But then again, how could we know that until yet another *zōbō* sets in and we are left to ruminate on what exactly it was that we have just missed?

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